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SUBJECT: IRAQI AMBASSADOR TO VATICAN ON CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ AND
BARZANI-BENEDICT XVI MEETING

REF: BAGHDAD 612

CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, A/DCM.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Iraqi Ambassador to the Holy See Albert Yelda denied to CDA and ADCM rumors that the Kurdish government was behind violence against Christians in Mosul. While recognizing that provincial elections were peaceful, Yelda worried about rivalries among Christians and tensions between Kurds and Arabs. Kurdish Region President Masoud Barzani's February 27 meeting with the Pope was positive. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a conversation with Charge d'Affaires and ADCM on March 4, Ambassador Yelda (protect), himself a Christian, denied rumors that Kurdish leaders were behind violence against Christians in Mosul in October of 2008. Assyrian Democratic Movement President Yonadam Kanna spread the rumors, Yelda maintained, to advance his own political agenda. Yelda had told Vatican officials not to believe the propaganda either.

¶3. (C) While relieved that provincial elections took place peacefully last January (reftel), Yelda was pessimistic about prospects for the future. He believed the announced timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops would encourage insurgents to lay low and resort to violence once the troops are gone. Politically, relations between Barzani and Maliki are deteriorating, Yelda said, and internal rivalries undermine the influence of Christians. Yelda was particularly critical of the Archbishop of Kirkuk, Louis Sako, whom he said was "too political and outspoken."

¶4. (C) Yelda described the Pope's latest meeting with Kurdish leader Barzani on February 27 as cordial. Benedict XVI referred to Barzani as "my friend" and thanked him for assisting Christians in northern Iraq. Yelda predicted that the willingness of the Pope to see Barzani yet again would lead other Iraqi politicians, such as Supreme Council of the Iraqi Revolution leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, to seek a meeting with the Pope in the future.

¶5. (C) Biographical note: Yelda, an Assyrian Christian, has been the Iraqi Ambassador to the Holy See since 2004. While opinionated, he concedes that he has spent many years out of the country and follows developments in Iraq from the distance. Before the fall of Saddam, he lived in London, where he collaborated with former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi in organizing exile groups against the Baathist party. Embassy Vatican officers meet with him periodically, particularly following visits of Iraqi officials to the Vatican. End biographical note.

¶6. (C) Comment: The timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq has generated considerable anxiety among the Iraqi Christian Diaspora. As the dates of the U.S. departure come closer, Iraqi Christians based in or visiting Rome see the

Kurdish Regional Government as the best bet for protection of Christians in Iraq in the short term. Apparently sharing this analysis, even Vatican officials who had been privately critical of Kurdish territorial ambitions have curbed their complaints about Kurdish behavior. End comment.

NOYES